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William C. Thompson, Pioneering Black Legislator and Judge, Dies at 94

By Sam Roberts

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William C. Thompson, a former Brooklyn legislator and judge who was in the vanguard of the black Democrats who staked their claim to elective office beginning in the mid-1960s, died on Dec. 24 at his home in Brooklyn Heights. He was 94.

The cause was complications of colon cancer, his son, William C. Thompson Jr., the former New York City comptroller, said.

In 1964, Mr. Thompson became the first black state senator elected from Brooklyn, a borough where, as recently as 1960, the fanciest restaurant, Gage & Tollner, did not seat black people.

He was on the City Council from 1969 to 1973; elected to the State Supreme Court in 1974; and named assistant administrative judge of the Supreme Court in Brooklyn and Staten Island in 1978. In 1980, he was the first black associate justice appointed to the Appellate Division of the Second Judicial Department in Brooklyn.

He retired from the bench in 2001 and returned to his law practice.

Mr. Thompson was a founder, with Robert F. Kennedy, of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, of which he was also director, and New York City regional director of the N.A.A.C.P.

In 1965, he was one of about 30 black politicians who served notice on New York Democratic leaders that they expected a greater voice in the party organization. Why, one of the black politicians asked, do they have to wait for a particular district to have a majority black population before the party fields a black candidate?

In 1970, when black residents accounted for about one-fourth of Brooklyn's population, Mr. Thompson became a leader of his party in the borough when he was elected chairman of the Kings County Democratic Committee.

Known as Willie, Mr. Thompson was a gregarious glad-hander who, while he could be uncommonly blunt, ingratiated himself by expressing his unbridled opinions in several languages. (He spoke Yiddish, and he mastered Neapolitan dialect while serving in the Army with the 92nd Infantry Division in Italy during World War II.)

He also spoke regularly to his son, who relied on his father's political advice.

"We talk all the time," the elder Mr. Thompson told The New York Times in 2009, when William Jr. was the Democratic nominee for mayor of New York. "Sometimes three times a day. Oh, sure. Why waste the knowledge?"

William Colridge Thompson was born on Oct. 26, 1924, in Manhattan. His father, William W. Thompson, sold furniture and was a city marshal. His mother, Louise (Greene) Thompson, was a domestic and cook.

After attending Franklin K. Lane High School on the Brooklyn-Queens border, Mr. Thompson received a degree in political science from Brooklyn College in 1948 and went on to graduate from Brooklyn Law School.

His marriage to Elaine Allen ended in divorce. In addition to their son, who is known as Bill, he is survived by their daughter, Gail Thompson, and three grandchildren.

Mr. Thompson was married twice more, to Sybil Hart Kooper an Appellate Division justice in New York, and Barbara Jamet, both of whom have died. Bill Thompson, a former president of the city Board of Education, was defeated by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg in the 2009 mayoral contest and is now chairman of the board of trustees of the City University of New York.

As a state legislator, the elder Mr. Thompson played an outsize role for a freshman. In 1965, he successfully co-sponsored a bill that voided a 19th-century provision barring the dissemination of birth control devices or information.

Four decades later, he nudged the Legislature as an outsider, recommending, as a member of a court-appointed panel, that New York City and State spend billions of dollars more on the city's public schools.

In 1968, after a federal court ordered the Legislature to redraw Brooklyn's congressional districts, ruling that they discriminated against black voters, he ran with the informal support of party leaders in the new 12th District.

He lost the Democratic nomination by fewer than 800 votes, out of about 13,000 cast, to Shirley Chisholm, who went on to be elected the nation's first black congresswoman.

When Ms. Chisholm ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972 (she was the first woman to do so), Mr. Thompson was the only one of the four Democratic district leaders in her congressional district whose national convention delegates were pledged to support her candidacy.

Ms. Chisholm won barely 5 percent of the delegates at the convention that year. Even after the election of Barack Obama to the White House in 2008, Mr. Thompson suggested that a majority of Americans still could not rise above a prevailing “quiet racism” to vote for a black candidate.

“Obama didn’t surprise me,” Mr. Thompson told The Times in 2009. “The American people did.”